

Sunspots

By

Karen S. Bell

A KSB Press Publication
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ISBN-13: 978-1482307573

ISBN-10: 148230757X

Printed February 2013

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Acknowledgements

I am so grateful for the generosity of family and friends who took time out of their busy lives to read this work and give me very important input and feedback. This work is the better for it. Whole-hearted thanks go to: Julia Bell, Jenafer Bell Howard, Mary Eckert, Carol Heckrotte (the comma queen), and Tahlia Newland. Tahlia Newland is the mastermind behind the Awesome Indies website, encouraging a growing segment of writers, such as myself—the indie author. She is awesome in her own right.

For Tim

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At the Edge of Chaos

*Swirling, swirling in the cosmos,
beams of flattening and bending
reach out to seize my soul
Hold me; hold me and carry me back
to the echo of your kiss
Hold me; hold me fast and take me to
the eternal nest that pulses
to an unknown yet familiar rhythm
Hold me; hold me as I slip
beyond reason and hope
As a love lost is won and captures
a heart broken but beating still
For at the edge of chaos, there is form
and structure
At the edge of chaos, there is life.*

—Karen S. Bell

Prologue

Swirling, swirling in the cosmos

“Aurora!”
This faint but urgent whisper gently touches my senses as I sleep the numbed and empty sleep of drug-induced oblivion. Under the thick, down comforter that I have pulled over my head, I can barely hear the high-pitched calling of my name in that lilting Southern drawl that I have come to love so much.

“Aurora!”

Again. I am fully awake now sure that I have heard it again and quickly free myself from my hiding place. My heart begins to race in anticipation. I jerk my head in the direction of the hallway expecting to see him come through the doorway pulling off his gold Rolex and kicking off his Ferragamo loafers. I can almost hear the rustle of his clothing while he tosses off his jacket and loosens his tie. In no time flat, he will be beside me with a hug and passionate kiss that arcs my sleep-numbed consciousness to arousal.

That’s how it has always been on late-night homecomings.

I focus my eyes in the dark but the hallway, the doorway, the room, do not reveal his presence. I sit up stiff and straight and with all my powers will the sight of him. But I hear no click of a watchband, no thump of shoes. Now I understand how silence can be deafening. I tune my ears to the smallest sounds in a desperate longing to once again catch the whisper of my name in the answering stillness. I wait. Nothing, there is nothing. Reality beckons and the enormity of the emptiness that surrounds me presses like heavy steel against my heart. My breath becomes a silent scream of agony that bursts into a shrieking reflection of my deep animal misery. “No, oh noooo.” Once freed, the sound of pain comes in waves of increasing strength that I cannot control and propels me to the bathroom in a crazed state of mind. I am fiercely insane in my fervor to end this nightmare that is now my life.

“Aurora? What are you doing, Aurora? Oh my God!” It’s Marina running from the hallway and screaming at me while she pulls the razor from my vice-like grip. She holds me so tight that I can no longer move and I sob in her arms as she strokes my hair. “There, there,” she says in that soothing gentle voice that only special women have.

I have often thought of that night and the miracle of Marina staying on with me after my parents went home right after the funeral.

As Marina strokes my hair and comforts me with her soft voice, she says, "Think of the good times, Aurora. You have so many cherished memories." Memories, ah yes, I had memories. Can one sustain oneself with memories? Can one keep the clutches of suicidal depression at bay with memories?

"I heard Jake, Marina. I know I heard him," I say through my hacking sobs.

"Yes, my sweet, I know." She stops stroking my hair and tenderly turns my head to look at her. Her piercing, blue eyes glow with the brilliance of transcendent knowledge and startle me into clarity. Indeed, her eyes tell me, it was true. I had absolutely heard him and suddenly I understood that my encounters with the unknown were a part of my life and always would be.

Marina, my mother's last partner in her experiment with homosexuality, has become like a cousin, an aunt, or sister even. She is, simply, family and an awesome presence commanding attention like a wildfire, a beacon of pulsating flame. Her thick, unruly, cascading curls of bright red hair hover about her shoulders and appear filled with electricity. She wears exotic attire from the Indian subcontinent that seems to float on a puff of air gently surrounding her delicate frame.

Marina believes she is my spiritual guide. That the exploding magnetic forces surrounding my conception when my hippy parents witnessed and celebrated the breathtaking beauty of the Northern Lights, have given me the ability to tap into hidden energies. She profoundly believes that the circumstances of my birth entangled me with the forces of the cosmos, to dimensions that others cannot see, or touch. According to her, the cosmos, the universe, the sun and all the planets in our solar system are intertwined with my existence. She has recently said to me, "The rhythms of the cosmos are your rhythms, and you have been given the gift of universal knowledge."

When she talks like that, my hair, at the nape of my neck, feels electrified and rises upward, a cold shiver passes through my body, and my skin breaks out in goose bumps. But the strange events that have recently taken place bring validation to her words. There is an acknowledgement of other worldliness to my experiences, the sense of traveling back through time, of seeing other versions of myself, of sensing Jake's ghost. Yes, I know something weird is undeniably happening.

"Try and rest," says Marina.

Rest. I know I need to rest. And so, I slip back into bed in my disturbed state of mind, and I try to think of the good times. To conjure up memories. With spontaneous lucidity, I understand that when a tragedy happens, there is always the benchmark of the before. Right up until that moment, it's the before and then immediately, the heart wrenching after. The before is sweet. The before is sanity and a life of promise. The before goes where it will and comforts me. Precious memories of childhood, loving thoughts of my family...the sweet before. The sweet before cuddles my broken heart and settles over me to quiet my distress. And so, I console myself with these thoughts as I review the journey that brought me here. I take myself back in time. Back to Brooklyn. To Brighton Beach. To the safety of innocence. And thoughts flow gently like a meandering stream.

Mom and Dad...and me.

As I bring those thoughts to the forefront, I once again bask in the simplicity of my childhood where the pain caused by scraped flesh was kissed away by Dad or Mom or a lover's rejection easily replaced by another's attention. And when I reminisce about those halcyon days, I hunger for an innocence that is lost forever.

Chapter One

beams of flattening

Memories of Mom, Dad, and me

Tell me, tell me, tell me again how you met,” I remember continuously pestering my father. My never-married parents, who lived apart, chose separate quarters on different floors in the same apartment building in Brighton Beach. They remained good friends even after they were no longer a couple. I was fascinated by their youthful personas, always obsessively curious about their relationship, searching for the hidden love that once lay bare for all to see. It was seductive to imagine them as lovers with hearts on fire because for as far back as I could remember they had not demonstrated any sexuality toward each other. Hello kisses and goodbye hugs were saved for others. For me, their youthful passion was an ancient myth—a romantic tale with no ending— just a fade to black as they went their separate ways. As a child, I hungered for any snippet, any bit of information that would create the fairy tale for which I longed.

My father ever willing to respond to my repetitive requests, would throw his head back in an indulgent chuckle and say, “Okay, okay my little Sunny sunshine. Just give me a chance to collect my thoughts.” Then there would be the habitual long pause as he sucked in his breath to give strength to his chain smoker’s voice followed by the ritualistic clearing of his throat. I would carefully watch all these familiar gestures getting ready for what came next—like shouting the end of a favorite song or joining in the punch line of a well-known joke. Speaking in a hushed tone, his voice blossomed into rose-petal softness sending waves of tangible bliss that slowly enveloped the small living room.

“It was a sunny, warm spring day in my 18th year when we met,” was the way he always began, and his expression reflected the nostalgia he felt for bygone days. His shift to the past was so focused, it gave off an electric current that would penetrate my skin as I murmured the words along with him. “The sky was cobalt blue and the wind was gentle. The grass was thick and tall along the edges of the sidewalk and patches of flowers burst in a cacophony of color.”

“Cacophony of color,” I would parrot in a respectful whisper loving how the sound of this strange unknown word along with its coupling tripped off my tongue. Cacophony of color. I love that phrase still.

My father would then continue, “It was our last year in high school, and I had noticed that pretty mother of yours right from the start but did nothing about it. That day, we arrived at the school bus stop at the same time. She was about to get on when she stumbled and dropped her book. I was standing behind her and so I picked it up. She smiled at me. Not too many girls smiled at me—not like that anyways. I knew right then that she was the one. My one and only—it took her a little longer, though, but eventually she came around.” Then he would fish for a cigarette, light it expertly, and take a deep drag finishing with, “And that’s how we met, my little Sunny sunshine.”

That was it. I hungered for more. But that was it. The ordinariness of this clandestine meeting always gave me pause. It definitely was not the kind of meeting in the tradition of F. Scott Fitzgerald or Tolstoy—but, nevertheless, significant—at least for me. It’s quite remarkable how seemingly trivial events can have the most powerful effects. A dropped book becomes the scenario for my existence.

When I think of my mother, in my mind’s eye, I visualize her as a young woman dressed in the clothing of her generation. She wears a white peasant blouse hanging off one shoulder and a burgundy pleated skirt made of gauze. Her tidy, black hair is parted in the middle and hangs straight to her waist. As an afterthought, I add a yellow flower, probably a daisy, and pin it near her left ear. Her brown eyes are wide with amusement, and she is smiling in her toothy way, like in the old photo buried in her top drawer. She smiles with a mouth that seems used to smiling; a mouth that now is set into turned-down corners and has been so for many years, a response to her serious work helping battered women for which she has dedicated her life.

I cannot picture my father in youth. To me, he has always been old and weak as tissue. Even in that buried-away photo, his faded tied-dye tee shirt swallows his sunken chest, and his worn-out bell-bottom jeans hang loosely around legs that he has often referred to as “skinny as cranes.” Curly wisps of his shoulder-length hair and scraggly mustache overpower his skeletal-like head emphasizing his large, hawkish nose. The hint of the sickness that would color his later years peeks through his pallor and brightly lit sky-blue eyes (my mother says they had a good crop of ’shrooms that year). The year is 1970. In those days, Steven and Harriet, a.k.a. Moonbeam and Starlight, tuned in, turned on, and dropped out whenever they could.

There, in that snapshot, stood my parents with arms intertwined in front of their battered second-hand VW bus decorated with my father’s

artwork, an array of his signature psychedelic flowers and rainbows. It's a frozen moment of hope and excitement, a cherished acknowledgement of their pairing, and the moment before they embarked on a pilgrimage to Canada to sit under a cloudless night sky and watch the spectacular display of the Northern Lights. I can almost hear Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band blasting from their 8-track stereo as they bumped and swayed their way over endless roadways heading north. The message had traveled quickly in their circle to "Come and see the spectacular colors, man. What a trip."

These dancing arcs of primary colors that captured their imagination and carried them to a dark, open field in the Canadian Yukon were a particularly beautiful display of the Northern Lights. Cosmic storms created from cool patches on the surface of the sun, known as sunspots, hurl through space emitting particles that interact with the Earth's magnetic field and are transformed into benign radiant arcs of color. Every 11 years, the sun explodes in a fury of these spots and the Lights, also known as the Aurora Borealis, become more intense and more spectacular.

The solar maximum that my parents watched in wonder in that fateful year merged their sexual energies with that of the cosmos and nine months later they named me, Aurora, to honor that event. My father nicknamed me, Sunny, because "Aurora, was too stuffy sounding for a wee babe." My mother thought, Sunny, too mundane and remained faithful to her original choice. When I was old enough to become self-aware, I decided I hated both names and eventually settled on, Celeste, inspired from a box of tea in the pantry.

Over time, neither parent gave up their name choices for me and used that rigidity as part of the wedge that grew between them. Hence, my friends, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents didn't really know what to call me. I was even the subject of a poem in English class, "The Girl with Three First Names." At high school graduation, I was listed as Aurora Celeste "Sunny" Goldberg. Later, when I decided to be an actress, I changed it to Celeste Abbott (in case some cast was listed alphabetically). Both my parents were from middle-class families that had migrated from Brooklyn to Long Island after WWII. After they met, they abandoned their parents' values and just like others of their generation moved to Haight-Ashbury where they wore love beads, padded around in filthy bare feet, and panhandled for money. "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," said Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams's, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and that line always comes to mind when I envision my parents' hippie lifestyle. This lucrative but boring way

to make a living created enough cash for their adventure to the North Country. After their “mind-blowing” experience in Canada, they were prepared to stay there if my father were drafted. But he was lucky, his number was way down on the list and there were, and still are, a lot of boys living in New York City.

When my mother discovered she was pregnant, they washed their feet, put on shoes, and moved to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn close to Mermaid Ave. where my father’s idol, Woody Guthrie lived before he got ill. They enrolled at the very affordable Brooklyn College. Starlight hitched-hiked back from the galaxy and was replaced by a motivated Harriet who continued her education in the area of law, moving out of our two-bedroom apartment just short of seven years and into a one-bedroom on the next floor up. She knew that my father would never amount to much and she didn’t want him claiming any of her meager assets. But that’s not what she told the world. “I’ll be no wife by common law or any other law,” she proudly told the horrified Russian immigrant woman who lived next door.

As I think of my childhood, it feels like a warm fuzzy blanket to me and I wrap myself in the memory of the love and security I felt even in my “unusual family situation,” as it was referred to by the snooty girls whose mothers would not let them sleep over at either apartment. I took glee in flaunting my parents’ bohemian lifestyle and quoted my mother to these same girls proudly reciting words I didn’t fully grasp. “My parents couldn’t care less about middle-class conventions, such as marriage and other religious rituals,” I said, and I can still see their bewildered faces as I turned on my heel and walked away in a huff to the comfort of my inner circle of geeks and losers.

My childhood was idyllic for me, even if for others it was off the grid. Loving beach strolls with my dad whose “Don’t sweat the small stuff,” was my mantra. The beach, which was just down the street, was my magical place with its beaten-up boardwalk and trash-laden sand. The beach permeated my essence and kept its promise, tide in, tide out providing pleasure in summer and solace in winter. That long stretch of beach with its barren winter sand and murky sea brought comfort to feelings of sorrow and was the perfect backdrop for the melancholy moods of adolescence and so it remains for me in this time of woe.

In my mind, I go to that beach of my childhood called Brighton, where it’s always winter, always cold, always a perfect spirit of desolation. I sit there under hovering dark snow clouds while an icy wind snaps pinpricks of sand against my skin making the punishing void, the disconnected tunnel of gloom, three dimensional and palpable. I can hear the rush of

waves and watch the ebb and flow of the dark ocean that nurtured and healed my soul. I can feel the wild abandon of nature, juxtaposed against cement, bricks, and mortar, connecting me to the wonder of life. The marvelous and awesome journey of my life, with all its glory...and all its suffering. My journey that has brought me to the ritual of sitting Shivah when I thought my life had just begun.

* * *

As I lie in bed with these thoughts, I finally notice that Marina has quietly come back into my room and is sitting in the armchair watching me. She offers me some more medicine and I shake my head, “no.” I don’t want to sleep, and I don’t want to be awake. There is no comfort in anything. She says, “Come. We’ll have a nice cup of tea.” And I follow her downstairs and into the kitchen, zombie-like. I watch her with dull eyes that do not see her movements as she opens cupboards and finds a teapot, cups, and tea bags. I listen with deaf ears to her hum a Russian tune. I sit patiently with no patience sipping the tea I cannot taste. In silence, we sit. In silence, we speak without speaking. Marina’s life force wills me to feel her love.

And then she tells me her plan. “Maybe, I’ll stay with you awhile. Nothing back in Brooklyn right now.” I answer, mouthing words that I want to feel and yet cannot feel because I have closed myself off to the emotions of life, “Oh yes, please stay, Marina. I couldn’t bear all this alone.” I’m overwhelmed by her generosity, my loss, and the hidden truths lurking under the surface waiting to be revealed. Then the cordoned off person inside me breaks through all my controls again and unwonted tears erupt in a torrent of suppressed anguish. I am enveloped in her arms and her soothing voice whispers calming words as I try to regain the safety of stoicism.

Marina and I, sisters of a sort, sit together in my huge kitchen, in my huge house, sharing the huge hole

in my heart as my tears pour down my face, flowing as if someone has turned on a spigot. Two small souls in a too-big kitchen of a too-big house silently wondering about the business problems of which his lawyer spoke using carefully chosen words somberly executed while his eyes burned with deep meaning. Problems that would have to be sorted out after I finished sitting “Shivah.” How can one cope with all of this? When will I wake up from this nightmare?

Eventually, it is dawn, and I must sit on the wooden bench that signifies my mourning as memories cloud the present and I relive a life that is no more.